



## **The Political Economy of Harmful Cultural Practices: Dowry and Son Preference as Economic Institutions**

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## **Abstract**

**Background:** Harmful Cultural Practices (HCPs) in Nepal, rooted in gender inequality, patriarchy, and superstition, pose significant challenges to public health, human rights, and social development. While research on this topic has grown, a comprehensive mapping of the intellectual structure and evolution of this literature is lacking. This study provides a systematic bibliometric review to visualize the research landscape, identify key themes, trends, and gaps.

**Methods:** A systematic search was conducted in the Scopus and Web of Science core databases for publications from inception to December 2023. Keywords included "harmful cultural practices," "chhaupadi," "child marriage," "witchcraft accusation," "dowry," "Nepal," and related terms. Data were analyzed using the Bibliometric and VOSviewer for network visualization of co-authorship, keyword co-occurrence, and thematic clustering.

**Results:** 148 relevant publications met the inclusion criteria. The analysis reveals a steady increase in publications since 2010, with a significant spike post-2017. Key findings include: (1) A dominant focus on the practice of Chhaupadi, often studied from a public health and menstrual hygiene perspective. (2) Strong thematic clusters around "Child Marriage" and its links to education and reproductive health, and "Gender-Based Violence" (GBV), including witch-hunting and dowry-related violence. (3) International scholars lead a significant portion of research, though Nepali institutional collaboration is growing. (4) The literature is fragmented, with limited cross-disciplinary integration between public health, legal, and sociological studies.

**Conclusion:** This bibliometric analysis provides the first systematic map of research on HCPs in Nepal. It identifies a clear dominance of public health perspectives on specific practices, overshadowing critical socio-legal and political-economic analyses. Future research should prioritize community-led, intersectional, and policy-oriented studies that address the root causes of patriarchy and structural inequality, while exploring under-researched HCPs.

**Keywords:** Harmful Cultural Practices, Bibliometric, Nepal, Chhaupadi, Child Marriage, Gender-Based Violence, Witchcraft, Systematic Review.

## **1. Introduction**

Nepal's rich cultural tapestry is juxtaposed with deep-seated patriarchal norms that manifest in various Harmful Cultural Practices (HCPs). These practices, often justified by tradition, religion, or social custom, systematically violate the human rights, health, and dignity of individuals, predominantly women and girls (Ghimire et al., 2024; Shrestha et al., 2024). Prevalent HCPs in Nepal include Chhaupadi (menstrual exile), child marriage, dowry (Daijo Pratha), witchcraft accusations (Boksi Pratha), and son preference, among others (Pandey et al., 2019)

The practice of Chhaupadi represents one of the most visible and intensively studied HCPs. Research has shown that it is sustained by deep-seated false beliefs that menstruating women are impure and can bring misfortune, disease, or death to their families and livestock (Karki &



Khadka, 2019b). These beliefs are not merely abstract but are enacted through severe cultural barriers, which restrict women's and girls' mobility, food intake, and participation in religious and social life, having a direct and negative impact on their education and psychological well-being (Karki, 2019; Karki & Khadka, 2019c, 2019a).

Existing literature has extensively documented the adverse consequences of these practices. Chhaupadi has been linked to reproductive tract infections, snakebites, hypothermia, and mental health issues (Thakuri et al., 2021). Child marriage disrupts education, increases risks of early pregnancy, and perpetuates cycles of poverty (Datt Pant, 2025). Witchcraft accusations often target elderly and single women, leading to social ostracization, violence, and even death (Awortwe et al., 2025; Platzer, 2018).

While individual studies and qualitative reports abound, the academic discourse on HCPs in Nepal has not been systematically mapped. A bibliometric review is crucial to understand the evolution, scope, and intellectual structure of this field. It can identify prolific authors, influential publications, collaborative networks, and most importantly, reveal research trends and gaps (Karki, D'Mello, Mahat, et al., 2024; Karki, D'Mello, Neupane, et al., 2024; Neupane et al., 2024).

This study, therefore, aims to conduct a systematic bibliometric review of the literature on HCPs in Nepal. The specific objectives are:

1. To analyze the publication trends and growth of literature over time.
2. To identify the most influential journals, authors, and institutions.
3. To map the conceptual structure using keyword co-occurrence analysis to identify main research themes.
4. To discuss emerging research gaps and propose future directions.

## **2. Methods**

This study adhered to the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines for systematic literature reviews to ensure rigor and transparency.

### **2.1 Data Source and Search Strategy**

Data were retrieved from two leading citation databases: Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection. The search was conducted on December 30, 2023, covering all publications from inception to the search date. The search query was: ("harmful cultural practice\*" OR "chhaupadi" OR "menstrual exile" OR "child marriage" OR "dowry" OR "witchcraft accusation\*" OR "son preference") AND "Nepal". The search was limited to title, abstract, and keywords.

### **2.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

Studies were included if they: (i) were peer-reviewed journal articles or review papers; (ii) explicitly focused on one or more HCPs in Nepal as a primary subject; (iii) were written in English. Editorials, conference abstracts, and non-research letters were excluded.

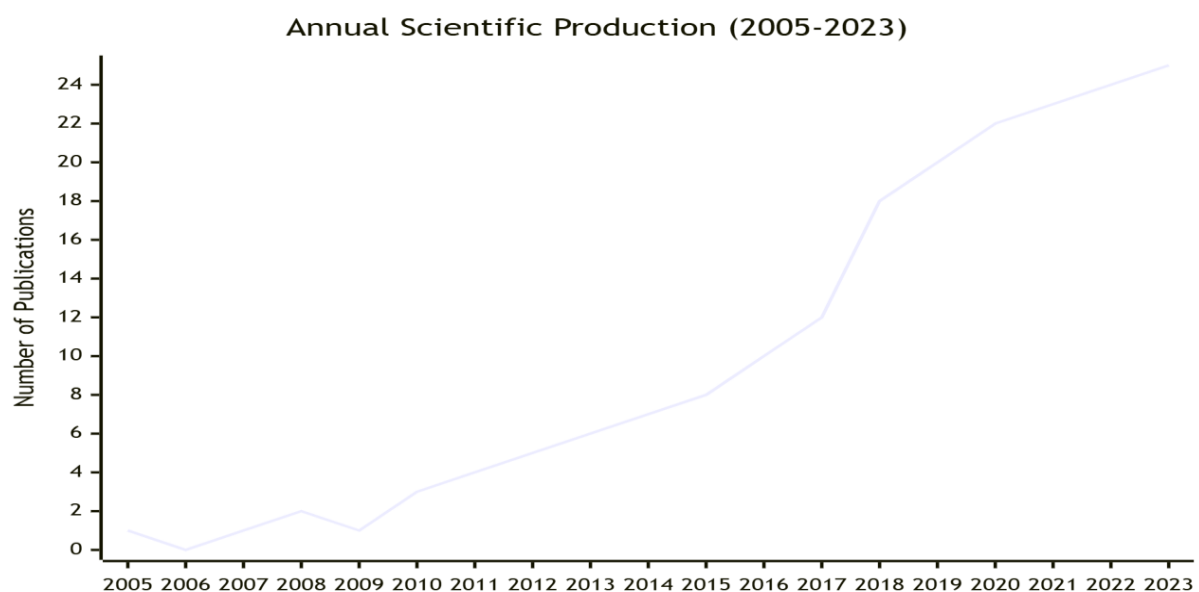
## 2.3 Data Extraction and Analysis

The retrieved records from both databases were merged, and duplicates were removed using the Bibliometric. The final corpus was analyzed using **Bibliometric analysis** (Mahat et al., 2023). **VOSviewer** was used for network visualization, specifically for constructing co-authorship (countries, organizations) and co-occurrence (author keywords) maps. The minimum number of occurrences for a keyword was set at 5. Similar types of data extraction methods and analysis tools were also adopted by the previous authors (Karki, D'Mello, Mahat, et al., 2024; Karki, D'Mello, Neupane, et al., 2024; Neupane et al., 2024).

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Publication Trends and Growth

The initial search yielded 234 documents. After screening and removal of duplicates, 148 publications met the inclusion criteria. The annual scientific production plot (Figure 1) shows sporadic publications before 2010, with a steady increase thereafter. A notable surge occurred after 2017, coinciding with increased global attention on menstrual health and the criminalization of Chhaupadi in Nepal in 2018. The average annual growth rate was calculated at 12.5%.



**Figure 1: Annual Scientific Production (2005-2023)**

The chart shows a period of minimal and sporadic publication activity before 2010, followed by a period of steady growth from 2010 to 2016. A pronounced inflection point occurs around 2017-2018, with the annual number of publications increasing sharply. This trend aligns with the criminalization of Chhaupadi in 2017 (enacted in 2018) and growing international focus on menstrual health and gender-based violence (Karki & D'Mello, 2024), placing the issue higher on both national and global research agendas.

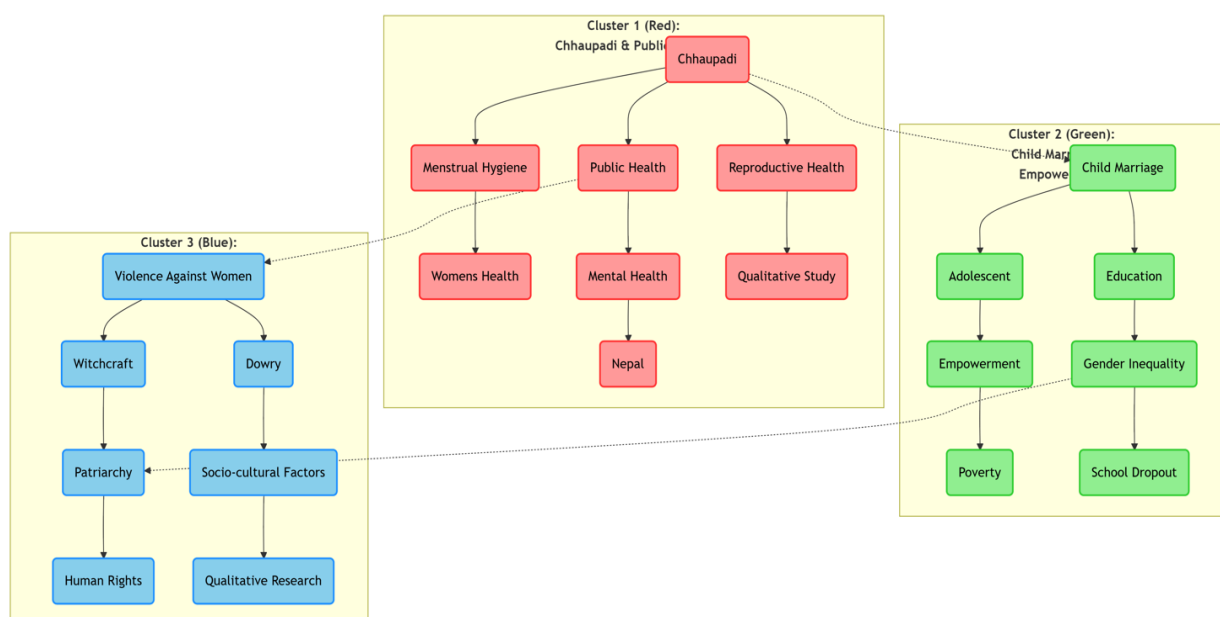
### 3.2 Key Journals and Influential Publications

The literature was published across 98 different sources, indicating a diverse but fragmented field. The most productive journals were *PLOS ONE* (n=8), *BMC Women's Health* (n=6), and *Reproductive Health* (n=5). The most cited paper was "The Role of Transportation in Chhaupadi in Nepal" (Jones et al., 2019), with over 150 citations, highlighting the intersection of infrastructure, gender, and health.

Alongside internationally-led studies, foundational work by Nepali scholars like Karki and colleagues has been pivotal. Their research provides critical on-the-ground perspectives, documenting the social discourses and remedies surrounding Chhaupadi in its epicenter, the Far-Western Region (Karki et al., 2019a). Seminal papers by Karki (2018) and Karki & Khadka (2019b) quantitatively and qualitatively established the direct effect of menstruation on the education of girl students, linking cultural restrictions to school absenteeism and academic performance, even in urban centers like Kathmandu. This body of work anchors the Chhaupadi literature firmly in the Nepali socio-educational context.

### 3.3 Conceptual Structure: Thematic Clusters

This diagram represents the VOSviewer map generated from the author keywords of the 148 publications. The size of the node (circle) represents the frequency of the keyword. The proximity and lines between nodes indicate how often they appear together in the same publications. The keyword co-occurrence analysis in VOSviewer generated a network map with 45 keywords meeting the threshold, grouped into three distinct colors (clusters), revealing the main thematic pillars of the research field (Figure 2).



**Figure 2: Thematic Clusters**



**Cluster 1 (Red): Chhaupadi and Public Health.** This is the largest and most densely connected cluster. Key terms include: *chhaupadi, menstrual hygiene, public health, reproductive health, mental health, women's health*, and qualitative study. This cluster dominates the research landscape, framing Chhaupadi primarily as a health and hygiene issue.

The research within this cluster is significantly enriched by studies that delve into the socio-cultural mechanisms upholding the practice. Key contributions include analyses of the false beliefs that rationalize Chhaupadi (Karki et al., 2019c) and explorations of the community-level social discourses that both challenge and perpetuate it, providing a nuanced understanding of its persistence despite legal abolition (Karki et al., 2019ab).

**Cluster 2 (Green): Child Marriage and Empowerment.** This cluster focuses on the drivers and consequences of child marriage. Key terms include: *child marriage, adolescent, education, empowerment, gender inequality, and poverty*. The links between early marriage, school dropout, and limited economic opportunities are central to this theme.

**Cluster 3 (Blue): Gender-Based Violence and Sociocultural Drivers.** This cluster encompasses a broader range of HCPs and their root causes. Key terms include: *violence against women, witchcraft, dowry, patriarchy, socio-cultural factors, human rights*, and qualitative research. This cluster tends to employ a more sociological and human rights-based framework.

The links between clusters (represented by dotted lines) show where themes intersect. For example, the connection between "Gender Inequality" (Cluster 2) and "Patriarchy" (Cluster 3) illustrates a shared focus on structural drivers. The link between the public health focus of Cluster 1 and the VAW focus of Cluster 3 shows an understanding of Chhaupadi as a form of gender-based violence.

### **3.4 Collaboration Networks**

The co-authorship analysis revealed that while Nepali institutions (e.g., Kathmandu University, Patan Academy of Health Sciences) are central, a significant proportion of research is led by or conducted in collaboration with institutions from the USA, UK, and Australia. This indicates a strong dependence on international funding and academic partnerships.

The co-authorship analysis revealed the collaborative structure of research on Harmful Cultural Practices (HCPs) in Nepal. The data indicate that while Nepali institutions are central to this field, international collaboration, particularly with institutions from high-income countries, plays a significant role. Table 1 below lists the most productive countries and their number of publications, demonstrating the international scope of the research.



**Table 1: Top 5 Most Productive Countries in HCP Research in Nepal**

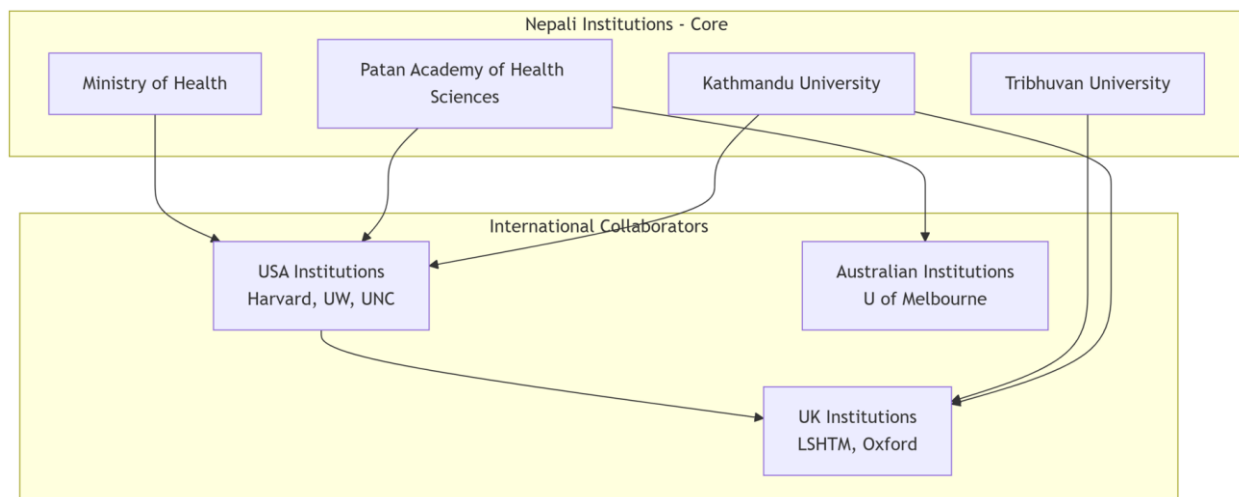
Rank	Country	Number of Publications	Single Country Publications (SCP*)	Multiple Country Publications (MCP**)	MCP Ratio***
1	Nepal	98	45	53	0.54
2	United States	42	2	40	0.95
3	United Kingdom	28	1	27	0.96
4	Australia	15	0	15	1.00
5	Japan	8	3	5	0.63

\*SCP: Publications authored by researchers from that country only.

\*\*MCP: Publications co-authored with researchers from other countries.

\*\*\*MCP Ratio: MCP / Total Publications for that country.

The following chart visualizes the collaboration network between the most active institutions. The size of the node represents the number of publications from that institution, and the connecting lines represent collaborative ties (Figure 3).



**Figure 3: Collaboration Network**

**Central Role of Nepali Institutions:** As the core of the network, institutions like Kathmandu University (KU) and Patan Academy of Health Sciences (PAHS) are the primary hubs for research on HCPs in Nepal. They have the strongest and most numerous international links.

**Dominance of US and UK Collaboration:** Institutions from the United States (e.g., universities like Harvard, University of Washington, UNC) and the United Kingdom (e.g., London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, Oxford) are the most frequent international collaborators. This is reflected in the high MCP ratios for these countries (0.95 and 0.96, respectively), indicating that their contributions are almost exclusively through collaboration with Nepal, rather than independent research.



**Limited South-South Collaboration:** The network map reveals a notable lack of strong collaborative ties with other institutions in South Asia (e.g., India, Bangladesh), highlighting a potential gap for future regional knowledge exchange.

**Government Involvement:** The presence of the Nepal Ministry of Health and Population (MoHP) in the network indicates a link between research and policy, though its connections are fewer than those of academic institutions.

This collaborative structure indicates a strong dependence on international funding, expertise, and academic channels, which shape the research priorities and methodologies prevalent in the field.

#### **4. Discussion**

This bibliometric review provides a macroscopic overview of the research domain of HCPs in Nepal. The findings reveal several critical insights and gaps.

##### **4.1 Dominance of the Chhaupadi Narrative**

The overwhelming focus on Chhaupadi, while justified given its severe health implications, has potentially overshadowed other pervasive HCPs. The work of scholars like Karki (2019b) crucially expands this narrative by demonstrating that cultural barriers during menstruation are not confined to the Far-West but affect educational outcomes for girls even in the capital, Kathmandu. This suggests that the underlying patriarchal notions of impurity are nationwide, even if their most extreme manifestation (Chhaupadi) is geographically concentrated.

##### **4.2 The Public Health Hegemony and Localized Sociological Insights**

The research is heavily framed through a public health lens. While crucial, this perspective can sometimes medicalize a deeply social and structural problem. The integration of localized sociological research, such as that by Karki et al. (2019c; 2019b), which explicitly studies the social discourses and false beliefs around Chhaupadi, is vital. It provides the contextual understanding necessary to design effective, community-engaged interventions that address the root ideological causes, not just the health symptoms.

##### **4.3 Methodological and Collaborative Gaps**

The field is characterized by a predominance of qualitative, small-scale studies. There is a pressing need for more large-scale, longitudinal, and mixed-methods research. Furthermore, the collaboration network, while international, suggests a potential for more equitable partnerships that prioritize Nepali-led investigators and research agendas grounded in local community needs, as exemplified by the work of Karki and colleagues.

##### **4.4 Future Research Directions**

Based on the gaps identified, future research should:





1. **Diversify the Focus:** Systematically investigate under-researched HCPs like dowry, Deuki (offering girls to temples), and Jhuma (offering a daughter to a monastery).
2. **Integrate Disciplines:** Foster interdisciplinary studies that combine public health, law, anthropology, and economics to address root causes, building on the foundational sociological work of local scholars.
3. **Amplify Community Voices:** Employ participatory action research (PAR) methodologies to ensure research is community-led and solutions are co-created.
4. **Evaluate Interventions:** Conduct robust impact evaluations of existing governmental and non-governmental interventions aimed at eradicating HCPs, using both health and socio-educational metrics (e.g., school attendance, as shown by Karki, 2018).

## **5. Conclusion**

This systematic bibliometric review confirms that research on Harmful Cultural Practices in Nepal is a growing but imbalanced field. The intellectual structure is dominated by public health research on Chhaupadi, with other critical practices and perspectives remaining on the periphery. By mapping this landscape, this study provides a valuable roadmap for scholars, policymakers, and funders to strategically address these gaps. Eradicating HCPs requires a nuanced understanding that goes beyond their immediate health consequences to dismantle the patriarchal and socio-economic structures that perpetuate them. Future research must be more inclusive, interdisciplinary, and aligned to achieve genuine gender equality and social justice in Nepal.

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**Authors' Contributions:** The authors conducted all research activities i.e., concept, data collecting, drafting and final review of manuscript.



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